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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/IPA, EAP, EAP/ANP
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TAGS: PREL PGOV IS AS
SUBJECT: GAZA: AUSTRALIAN RESPONSE MAKES ISRAELI
AMBASSADOR HAPPY

REF: CANBERRA 13

Classified By: Economic Counselor Edgard Kagan. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

¶1. (C/NF) Israeli Ambassador Yuval Rotem is very satisfied with the Australian response to the fighting in Gaza. Australian Government statements, including vacationing PM Kevin Rudd's January 5 remarks, have emphasized the need for an end to HAMAS rocket attacks on Israel and halting arms shipments into Gaza. Most Australian media reporting has been "surprisingly balanced," according to Rotem, who commented that Australian protests have been "very limited" in comparison to those during the 2006 fighting in Lebanon and the 2003 operations in Jenin. Rotem said he had been impressed with Acting PM Julia Gillard, who has taken the lead in coordinating the GOA public and private response to the Gaza fighting. Gillard impressed the Israelis with her tough questions and understanding during a January 2 phone conversation with Israeli PM Olmert. Rotem is encouraging the "very pro-Israel" Rudd to visit Israel in March by suggesting that such a visit will increase his ability to be a player on Middle-Eastern issues, particularly Iran. Commenting that FM Stephen Smith has been "surprisingly absent" on Gaza, Rotem said Smith made clear that he did not want to interrupt his vacation to work on the issue. Rotem, who is also accredited to New Zealand, expressed amazement that Wellington has "been so reasonable" on Gaza, saying that this marks a real departure from the era of former PM Helen Clark. End Summary.

¶2. (C/NF) Israeli Ambassador Yuval Rotem told Econcouns January 9 that he is very satisfied with Australia's response to the Gaza conflict. Commenting that Australian Government

statements have been "very balanced," Rotem said that he has worked closely with Acting PM Gillard and National Security Advisor Duncan Lewis to keep them informed of Israeli thinking and the latest developments. Rotem said that Gillard and Lewis have been very understanding of Israel's military action, while stressing the need to minimize civilian casualties and address humanitarian concerns. Rotem said that the Lewis and Office of National Assessments (ONA) Director General Peter Varghese "were nervous" about the possible consequences of the Israeli ground operations in Gaza. Along with Rudd's Foreign Policy Advisor Gary Quinlan, Lewis and Varghese are very interested in what is happening in the cease-fire talks in Cairo.

Gillard A Surprise

¶13. (C/NF) Rotem said that Gillard's public statements surprised many Israeli Embassy contacts as being far more supportive than they had expected. Israeli officials were Qsupportive than they had expected. Israeli officials were impressed with Gillard's performance during a January 2 call with PM Ehud Olmert, he said, commenting that this was a relief because it had been very difficult to persuade Olmert to make the call. Rotem said that he received a readout highlighting that Gillard had asked tough questions and shown good understanding of the Gaza situation, while reassuring Olmert that Australia understood the reasons for Israel's actions. During a January 8 interview, Gillard told a reporter: "I did say in the early days and I would happily say it now that obviously there was Hamas shelling (sic) into southern Israel and Israel responded."

PM's Statement

¶14. (C/NF) Rotem praised PM Rudd's January 5 statement (reftel) as being "very supportive" of Israel because of their emphasis on the need for halting arms shipments into Gaza as well as referring to HAMAS as a terrorist organization. He said that several senior Labor Party contacts have told him privately that the PM has been a bit jealous of the attention garnered by Gillard and that this led him to speak to the issue on January

Playing to Rudd's Vanity

¶15. (C/NF) Rotem said that he is encouraging PM Rudd to travel to Israel in March in order to strengthen his voice on Middle East issues, particularly Iran. Rotem has argued to Rudd and to National Security Advisor Lewis that being one of the first foreign leaders to meet the new Israeli leadership after the upcoming elections will give the PM more credibility with other Western leaders. Commenting that Rudd has a strong affinity for and good understanding of Israel, Rotem said that Israel recognizes that Australia will "never be the United States" but will listen to Canberra "when it is also clear that they are not the Europeans." Acknowledging that he is acting without instructions from Israel, Rotem said that Rudd is very interested in strengthening his ability to have a voice on Iran with the new U.S. Administration.

Tepid Public Reaction

¶16. (C/NF) Commenting that the Australian public has shown little reaction to the Gaza fighting because it is happening when many are on vacation, Rotem termed the various demonstrations around Australia as small and ineffective at mobilizing broader public support. He said that they have tended to highlight divisions within the Arab community rather than reach out to the broader Australian public. This low-key public response is a sharp departure from the much more vocal and better-organized protests during the 2006 fighting in Lebanon and the 2003 fighting in Jenin. It has been encouraged by the Australian media's "even-handedness,"

though Rotem complained that "this has started to change since the ground offensive began."

Where's FM Smith?

¶7. (C/NF) FM Stephen Smith has been "surprisingly absent" on Gaza, according to Rotem, who said that he had approached the FM at the beginning of the conflict to suggest that this would be a good opportunity to take advantage of PM Rudd's vacation to take the lead on a high profile foreign policy issue. Smith had initially expressed interest, then sent word through an intermediary that he did not want to interrupt his vacation. Rotem noted that on several occasions he has been ordered to pass messages to the FM and that Smith's office has been unable to get in touch with him for several days.

Kiwi Surprise

¶8. (C/NF) Also accredited to New Zealand, Rotem said that he was very surprised at the Kiwi response to the Gaza crisis. Saying that Israel had grown used to former PM Helen Clark issuing statements on Middle East issues "that could have been drafted in Damascus," Rotem said that the new Government has been a very welcome change. He commented that they had avoided making a public statement and then issued one that was "surprisingly balanced." Rotem said that this was a very welcome change and that it has been noticed in Israel.

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